

Challenges of Economic Data Collection During a Pandemic

Mark Govoni

Branch Chief, Collection Preparation Branch
U.S. Census Bureau, Economic Management Division
September 23, 2021

Pre-Pandemic State: Mail Operations

- The National Processing Center (NPC) in Jeffersonville, IN performs the predominant support services for Econ's data collection operations
- Heavy reliance on mail operations with forms and letters sent to respondents from NPC
- Mail schedules had built in time to print and assemble based on size and complexity of mailing
- Certified mailings were conducted for many surveys as a best practice to drive in response for delinquent respondents late in the collection cycle

Pre-Pandemic State: Respondent Communication and Clerical Operations

- Incoming and outgoing telephone operations were conducted solely on site at NPC in various units trained for each survey program
- Clerical operations for check-in, keying, research, Undeliverable as Addressed (UAA) updates and other survey updates were part of normal NPC operations and conducted on a flow basis by onsite staff
- Email operations were used primarily for follow-up operations with no survey contact sharing

National Processing Center (NPC)

- NPC supports roughly 42 Econ surveys covering mail, email, phone and clerical operations
- The start of the pandemic in March 2020 saw NPC staff mandated to stay home or report onsite in a very limited fashion
 - Mail Operations
 - Telephone Operations
 - Clerical Operations
- NPC staff were not Telework ready, did not have equipment to support Telework, and many of their jobs were not conducive to working remotely

Impact on Businesses

- Respondents were not physically in office to retrieve mail
- Left more voicemails
- Respondents working from home with no access to records needed to complete surveys
- Furloughs and layoffs
- This all led to lower response to Econ surveys

Mail Operations

- Limited staff and printing support
- Adjustment of schedules for printing and shifts in NPC
- Certified mailings are resource intensive
- Form and letter mailings

Mail Operations: Mitigation Strategies

- Increased use of email
- With limited staff onsite at NPC:
 - Prioritized Indicator Surveys
 - Implemented automated Priority Mailing
 - Implemented more Pressure Sealed mailings
 - Daily monitoring and prioritizing of mail activities

Respondent Communication Support

- Traditional activities conducted in NPC were suspended:
 - Inbound phone support
 - Outbound phone support
 - Secure email messaging support

Respondent Communication Support: Mitigation Strategies

- All incoming calls were sent to voicemail
- HQ support for voicemails and secure email messaging
 - Survey Analysts, Administrative staff, Collection staff
 - Full Service Account Management (FSAM)
- Implemented Robo Calls
- Automated time extension request
- Stood up full telework ready clerical staff at NPC
 - Use of common systems to increase staff available
 - Virtual training

Clerical Operations

- Address Updates - Updates to respondent addresses received by returned mail, incoming phone operations or analyst updates
- UAA updates - Keyed into processing systems via returned mail and research operations were not performed during pandemic
- Forms keying - Data received via forms returned by mail and keyed into processing systems were on a limited basis
- Research operations - Actions performed by NPC and HQ analysts to update contact information for respondents

Clerical Operations: Mitigation Strategies

- Automated programs to update addresses
- Updated UAA procedures to stop shipments to HQ and scan for electronic review
- Prioritized research and keying operations once staff were allowed into building

Expansion of Email

- Increase in Email Operations as the predominant collection mode
 - HQ performed email research operations for many previous letter/form mailers
 - Surveys began to share email addresses
 - Implemented initial email collection activities
 - Began to use historical and secondary contact for email follow ups
 - Allowed us to perform the Small Business Pulse survey -1 million respondents sent emails every 9 weeks resulting in 25% response

Operational Challenges to Email Expansion

- Barriers to delivery
 - Spam/junk mail
 - Company/ISP restrictions
 - Respondent system limitations and throttling
- Undeliverable and 'bounce backs'
- Email overload or burden
- HTML coding/Browser formatting
- Legitimacy concerns
- Management of contact and organizational changes

Benefits that Arose During Pandemic

- Expansion of email operations
- Survey collection adjustments became permanent such as Pressure Sealed mailings, Priority mailings, Robo Calls and removal of some paper operations
- Stood up virtual training between HQ and NPC for clerical and phones support operations
- Move towards Adaptive Collection
- NPC became TW ready which also opens up the door to new opportunities

Questions for the Committee

- How do we understand respondent limitations and adapt our practices for email expansion?
- How do we develop a more robust contact management and database strategy to be more adaptive within collection?
- How do we adapt our collection methods to meet respondents' challenges with ever changing workplace environments?

Mark Govoni
301-763-6715
Mark.E.Govoni@census.gov